



radical democracy

interview:

jonel edwards

youth engagement director/
lead organizer, dream defenders
#movementforblacklives

David Olson Jonel Edwards for Radical Democracy

Jonel is the Training and Member Development Director for Dream Defenders, a group focused on transformational organizing and nonviolent resistance in Florida. She has also held several leadership roles with the NAACP, and worked for the Southern Poverty Law Center on Juvenile Justice issues. We in spoke the summer of 2016.

Radical Democracy: Could you talk a little about the Dream Defenders and what your involvement is?

Jonel Edwards: The Dream Defenders are a statewide organization in Florida that started in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin. People all over the country were protesting to get George Zimmerman arrested, because initially, after the murder, he was allowed to go home on reprieve for forty days. The Dream Defenders were a bunch of young people in Florida who decided to do something and, thinking about Selma and the history around Civil Rights marches, organized a three-day march from Daytona, Florida to Sanford, Florida. And when they got to Sanford, Florida, they shut down the police department.

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A few of the protesters locked the doors to the police station, demanding that the police arrest Zimmerman, this man who killed an innocent child. There were actually three demands: the arrest of Zimmerman, the firing of the police chief, and the creation of a blue ribbon committee to investigate the murder. Shortly after shutting down the police station, Zimmerman was arrested, the blue ribbon committee was formed, and the police chief eventually stepped down.

RD: Right on.

JE: Folks needed to keep doing something, and from there the Dream Defenders spread to college campuses. We talked about the issues in our community, like the school to prison pipeline –Trayvon Martin was only in Sanford because he was suspended from school in Miami, for having an empty bag that smelled like marijuana. We also did work around a bill called SB 2112, which basically allowed any sheriff in Florida to shut down juvenile facilities for cost-saving reasons, and move kids into adult facilities.

We were also trying to figure out, what is organizing? What does that mean for us? What does it look like in the State of Florida?

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This whole time, the Zimmerman case was unraveling. Eventually he went to trial, and when he was acquitted we ended up taking over the Florida State Capitol for thirty-one days and thirty nights.

That catapulted us into a spotlight. The attention felt really good, but we realized we were losing focus, being pulled in all these different directions. We weren't really doing work on the ground in the ways we really wanted and needed to be doing. For the last year, we have been in an organizational “DNA” or strategic planning process, getting back to our communities and not necessarily trying to do so much. We had members all across Florida, eight to ten chapters at one point, but getting the work off the ground was really hard, because we were spread so thin.

RD: And where is the organization now?

JE: We've scaled back to three squads — in Miami, Broward, and St. Pete. We still have general membership across the state, but our local squads will really be getting back to community organizing, and a heavy emphasis on culture. A lot of our work has focused around the prison-industrial complex.

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We call it "the Trap" — the system of miseducation, policing, and incarceration of our communities that are keeping us in this endless cycle.

RD: What do you mean by a “heavy emphasis on culture?”

JE: A lot of our work is digging deep into our communities, building relationships, and starting to shift our ways. What that looks like is what we're calling "FREE Zones," basically places in the community — and this is a later phase in our strategy — someone's home or business or school, where we don't arrest people, we won't call the police on you. We practice restorative justice, de-escalation.

RD: What have you been learning from this dialog with the community?

JE: Our organization talks about keeping our communities safe from police brutality, but folks in our communities are also killing each other. Some people in our community say:

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“You're telling me about the police, but I can't even walk outside. The police aren't the problem in my community. The problem is these kids are killing each other.” And we've been grappling with how to deal with the violence in our communities.

When someone is killed, often the first reaction is, let's get someone indicted, let's get someone arrested. We don't necessarily think about the emotional toll on families, or how to show love and be a community for this family. **We need to think not only about punishment, but about healing.**

Because of the poverty they're facing, people in our community are also destroying themselves. One aspect of building community is acknowledging and understanding the external factors that create these environments, and realizing that we need to nurture our relationships in these communities. I don't think we've gotten to a place yet of visioning with communities.

We vision with our members: we talk about not having prisons, about restorative justice. People ask, What do I do in a domestic violence situation? How do I not call the police? For our members, these are real questions.

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Our answers aren't going to be perfect, but we want to offer options to our community, and we need to have these conversations.

RD: You've mentioned restorative justice a couple of times. Could you talk a little bit about that?

JE: **Restorative justice deals with criminal activity, but also with how folks are harmed — both the party who's been harmed and the person who's done the harm — and the process of figuring out how we can reconcile and bring the person who's done the harm back into the community.**

RD: Got it. What are you working on now in your new role as Training and Member Development Director?

JE: Initially, we didn't have an official way to become a Dream Defender. It was pretty much like, I came to a meeting, I came to an action, I got a shirt, I'm a Dream Defender. And we realized that that's not a good way to do it. *[laughs]* Now we have a basic orientation of six trainings that everyone goes through. There is a clear path for folks to become members.

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There's also a dichotomy formed around organizing: either you're on the ground and you do the work, or you study. Some folks don't feel the need to study, they feel the need to really focus on practice, and doing more. So, another aspect of my role is about political education and making sure that we're using theory as a tool, learning more about what's going on in the world and our communities and making that a continuous part of our organizational work. So we're not just responding to events.

RD: Recently the Movement for Black Lives released its policy platform, "A Vision for Black Lives." This seems to be a major turning point for the Movement: It really announces that this is no longer a protest movement, but has a vision and an agenda.

JE: I have been having conversations around the policy platform with folks in other movements, and a lot of the response has been, thank you. White people are constantly asking us, what do you want? What can we do? Now we can show people. We can say, this is it. And like you said, **we're moving from being just a protest movement into something else.** Until now, it has been largely reactions, and protests, and shutting shit down. Which is good, to a point, and then you burn out. So this is an important step.

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Folks can think about what the work on the ground looks like, but now we can talk about what the world that we are fighting for actually looks like. I definitely think it is a turning point for the Movement for Black Lives.

RD: The first demand is “End the War on Black People.” What is meant by that, exactly?

JE: I didn't personally work on the platform, but I can give you my interpretation. **This country has been built on the exploitation of Black people — over the centuries the way it is done has been transformed, but we're still being exploited by white supremacy and capitalism and patriarchy.** So we're really talking about changing the system that we are living under right now. A system that will send a person of color to jail for thirty years for a little bit of weed, but let a white male swimmer go to jail for three months for rape. Not to say that I believe in incarceration in any way, but the way our system is set up is constantly to the detriment of people of color.

RD: Outside of the Vision, the Movement for Black Lives is connecting global capitalism, the Palestinian cause and climate change to Black liberation here in the United States, and has sent delegations to support Native American activists at Standing Rock. Why this expansion in scope, and how is this all connected?

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JE: What is it that MLK says? “Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere.” We literally live in the belly of the beast. The U.S. government is destroying countries all over the world. As we're talking about our enemy, or the issues that we're fighting, we can't address them without a global lens. **What's happening in Brazil has a lot to do with what's happening in the States, in Mexico, in Palestine. It's all connected.** It's: Act local, think global. It does shift our strategy and our view of the world. It's also important to know we're not the only ones out there fighting. There are people across the world looking to us, who we can also look to and learn from, as well.

RD: There was an immediate pushback to this connection to the Palestinian cause, and even suggestions that the Movement for Black Lives was anti-Semitic. Was that surprising? The Dream Defenders have also had a couple delegations go directly to Palestine, if I'm not mistaken.

JE: I was and wasn't surprised at the same time. One of the founders of Dream Defenders is Palestinian, and he has made what's happening in Palestine a part of his life's work and has educated us as an organization about what's going on there.

Jonel Edwards Interview con't

We definitely have a commitment to making sure that people understand what's happening in Palestine. I went on the last delegation in May, and it was transformational and life-changing. There's only so much you can read, and then you go and you're like, Shit, I couldn't read enough to have been prepared.

RD: And how was that trip? Did it make the struggle for Black liberation here in the US feel more connected to the Palestinian struggle for liberation?

JE: Definitely. Even before my trip, just looking at the amount of money the U.S. gives in aid to Israel is outrageous. When we talk about divest/invest [in the Vision for Black Lives], that is one place that we could divest *from* and then invest that money *into* our communities, particularly communities of people of color.

Our tax dollars are funding what's happening with Israel and Palestine. It's a settler-colonial state, and we've been there, as people of color. There are a lot of parallels in what's happening there now to what our historical experience has been.

RD: A lot of people in the Movement are struggling with the need to keep focusing on radical or systemic change, and the possibility of Trump winning the election. Any thoughts?

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JE: This election is something. We're all caught up in this polarizing moment between Hillary and Trump, but there are also really big things that we could be doing to change our local governments that are impacting people's daily lives. I think honing in on local work and local elections is very important, right now. With this presidential election, it's really just us picking the playing field that we want to do the work on.

RD: One of the main themes of the *Radical Democracy* project is connecting radical social Movements of the past with those of today. How important is Movement history to the Dream Defenders, and to your work, personally?

JE: It's incredibly important. As I was saying earlier, we're really trying to get to a place where we value study and theory, alongside doing the work on the ground. We need to make sure that we're not only reading, but building relationships with those who are still here, who are willing to look at our strategy and say, yeah, that sounds amazing, or that sounds terrible, and this is what I know from my experience.

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A large of our organizational DNA process was reaching out to Movement elders to talk about what we were doing.

RD: And how beneficial was that for you personally?

JE: It was great. Although, some were more beneficial than others. *[laughs]* **I think there's a generation gap in the Movement, and it's real important that we have inter-generational spaces, because there's so much more we could learn, and so many ways to innovate from what we've already learned about Movement history.**

RD: Why is this work so important to you?

JE: I came into Dream Defenders thinking about mass incarceration, the school to prison pipeline, and how that related to my brothers, and their experiences growing up. And then one day I thought, wow, your stories are always about your brothers and their experience, and you never actually think about yourself and your own experience. Being a Black woman, I have seen myself completely transformed by the work, especially the work that we

Jonel Edwards Interview con't

do around challenging patriarchy. I do trainings now, speaking in front of rooms of people, which is something I never would have done. I have been deeply impacted by patriarchy, well, hetero-patriarchy and ideals of what it means to be a woman, taking up space, fighting for things, being opinionated, feeling anger, and feeling like I could do something different.

Working with other women, other girls, and other folks, and being able to see how systemic change and individual change are connected, and being part of a collective and community, is really powerful to me.

Because at the end of the day, I think that **what we're really fighting for is to be in real community with each other, and have real relationships with each other. And I've been able to feel that and experience that in the Movement. That's what I fight for every day.**

RD: It reminds me of MLK's talking about the “beloved community” being the ultimate goal of all this.

JE: Yes.

RD: Could you talk a little more about being a woman in the Movement for Black Lives, or in the Dream Defenders organization, specifically?

Jonel Edwards Interview con't

JE: We have a Womyn's Faction that we put together at the beginning of our strategic planning process, because we realized that patriarchy or hetero-patriarchy was really having an impact on our organization, especially via member turnaround and opportunities within Dream Defenders. So, this past year we've been having a lot more conversations about how hetero-patriarchy impacts our work, and we've created a code of conduct, an intersectionality filter. This seems to be an issue that has destroyed a lot of movements in the past, so I'm glad that we are seriously addressing and paying attention to it.

In the Movement in general, I think we're becoming more welcoming, meeting people where they're at, and understanding that we're all socialized and taught certain beliefs. We're getting to a place where we can talk about these issues, and start to shift and transform the way that we view certain gender roles and identities.

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Jonel Edwards Interview con't

JE: Honestly, sometimes it's really hard. But **what makes me hopeful right now is seeing that our movements are becoming more sophisticated, more focused and more positive.** As you said, the Vision for Black Lives platform is a huge shift, and seeing the Black Lives Matter folks go to Dakota to support the indigenous people gives me hope.

On another level, the community that we are able to build in our organization, and the things that we're working through — real issues, real shit — that makes me hopeful, too. It's allowing me to see what community looks like, and see that we are capable of dealing with serious issues, and communicating about them, and loving each other through them, and figuring out what accountability can look like.

Just being in relationships with people in our organization, and seeing us actually practice the things that we're talking about — that's what makes me the most hopeful.



This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.